GREAT RIVERS PRESBYTERY MEETING

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"YES"

Scripture
2 Corinthians 1:12-22
John 21:16

Why? it might legitimately be asked, Why us? Why now? Why in the world is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) talking about raising an enormous amount of money, $150 million, now, of all times?

The American economy is flat, at best. We may be emerging from a recession but it is not a dramatic emergence. In fact it is not visible among most of the people who sit in Presbyterian pews these days. Why now?

Furthermore, we Presbyterians are not exactly at the top of our game these days. Like the baseball team which plays closest to the neighborhood where I live and move and have being, and to whom I have given my heart - in spite of common sense and the harsh schoolmaster of history, the Chicago Cubs and the Presbyterian Church look better on paper than in real life: both exist with high hopes, noble aspirations and inconsistent pitching. Both live with the dreary recent past by way of an undying eschatological focus - "wait till next year!" That's about as far as that metaphor will go, I suspect.

And yet we Presbyterians and the Chicago Cubs have been here from our respective beginnings, charter members of the league. We are part of a former establishment with most of its glory in the past. We play in old facilities, not nearly as glamorous and efficient and attractive as the newer franchises. When the media wants a story about a super-church in Chicago it's Willow Creek Community and not Fourth Presbyterian... which it seems to me is the ecclesiastical equivalent of playing a world series in some place God did not mean for baseball to be played - like Toronto.

For twenty years we have been lamenting the slow decline of the mainline churches in our culture. We have been engaging in corporate hand-wringing for as long as I've been an ordained minister. We are reduced to cheering whenever the rate of decline slows a bit. So why a church-wide campaign to raise $150 million?

And on top of it all, when we finally found ourselves back in the center of things recently, the subject of front page newspaper attention, and even the network evening news, it wasn't because of our commitments to peace and racial justice, or our good works and brilliant theology, but because we were talking out loud about sex. You'd think we'd lie low for a while, lick our wounds, get our act together and reorganize ourselves a few more times, before we stuck our corporate neck out on a potential disaster like this $150 million adventure.

Why now?

The answer has something to do with our faith at its deepest and most profound, at a level so deep in the soul of this church and so deep in your heart and mine that there are no words eloquent enough to express it. It is our basic attitude, our fundamental world view: what the Germans call "weltenshaung": as men and women whose lives have been touched, whose very being has been reshaped by God's love in Jesus Christ. It is best expressed perhaps in one three-letter word - YES.

St. Paul, clearly struggling to say what he means with clarity and not getting the job done very well, I think gives up, puts his systematic, Pharisaical logic aside, and says it this way, finally:

"the Son of God, Jesus Christ, was not 'Yes and no,' but in him it is always 'Yes.' For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.'" [2 Corinthians 1:20]

We were sitting in my study talking about the Bicentennial Fund with an advertising man who is employed by one of the large Chicago agencies: a concept and design man, who among other things created the "Nut and Honey" TV ads.

He's a good churchman, knows the Bible. We asked him to help us with our Chicago Campaign. Roy said he didn't know much about church fund raising and wondered where to begin... So he went home and of all things got out his Bible and wrote down the New Testament, passages that struck him and related to this effort. When we met next we sat in my study and the ad man read us verses from his New Testament, and he said "this is what I have been thinking - and this is what I propose our campaign theme ought to be, and he pulled out two small posters- One said - "Yes, we can" and the other simply said "Yes."

We have set ourselves to the task of raising $150 million for the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. We have set out to give this church of ours the opportunity to renew and rebuild itself after decades of diminishing numbers, diminishing hope, diminishing confidence. We have set out to do some new things, to fix up some existing projects and to think anew about being God's Presbyterian people in a new century. In the Bicentennial Fund we have set out, in the face of a persistent, negative chorus of "no's," "what if's," and "yes but's," to say "YES" - we

can do something in our day that will provide a Presbyterian witness for our children and their children, for our country and our world... which I am Presbyterian enough to believe would be infinitely poorer without the feisty faith of Presbyterian men and women.

You have set out to raise $1.2 million with a challenge goal of $1.6 million within your own family in the Presbytery of Great Rivers.

What an exciting prospectus - balanced, but ambitious! The money that will remain here in this Presbytery will do some very good things, some creative and innovative new ideas, which look to the future with hope, and which express the very best of our Presbyterian tradition: a caring and compassionate spirit, an educated laity, with a major commitment to shelter the homeless, to visit the prisoner and to stand squarely in the name of Jesus Christ in the midst of human need.

And the fact that the Presbyterian Church nationally, and you, here in this Presbytery, have dared to dream a little, and hope a little, have dared to stop wringing our hands over the deplorable state of the church and actually spend a little of our time and energy asking about what new things God may be calling us to do, is in itself a life-renewing, life-giving enterprise. We have, I believe, responded to the Spirit of God - who always calls us to think about the future.

And you are setting out today to ask every Presbyterian in every congregation to help - **YES - you can do it!**

But it won't be easy. It is not an easy time in the church to say "Yes" to the future. It is not an easy time to say the kinds of things I have been saying and to be taken seriously in the world.

A Jules Feiffer cartoon in the Chicago Tribune this morning illustrated: A man and woman drawn in that familiar brittle style of his, are talking:

He says: "There is no hope."
She says: "There is no compassion."
He says: "There is no reason."
She says: "There is no future."
He says: "There is only chaos."
She says: "There is only isolation."
He says: "There is only despair."
She says: "I could talk to your forever!"
He says: "You really turn me on!"

The editor of a major newspaper wrote an editorial recently on the pessimism and depression he senses in the American spirit. The newspaper editor calls it the New Cynicism, after the new narcissism from which we preachers got so much mileage. He

writes: "As America mopes and the economy falls in the nineties, cynicism soars."

Echoing the late Bert Giamatti's thesis that the best way to understand a culture is to observe how it "plays." This commentator proposed that popular entertainment always reflects the spiritual health of a culture - and he finds ours to be overwhelmingly pessimistic and ugly. "Hard Copy," "Unsolved Mysteries," "Good Fellows" - which was one of the best movies last year, about a mobster with no conscience in a world with no rules, no punishment, no regret, and no hope.

"The Simpsons" with belch jokes and bathroom titters. "Roseann" who cynically proclaims that we can't change the world, we can only scoff at it.

Yes we can? Not an easy word to say and be taken seriously. But the saying it is, I believe, critical. It is what I believe God calls us to say - **Yes, Yes we can.**

President Henry Copeland at the College of Wooster began a fine opening convocation last fall by telling the Aesop Fable - Belling the Cat:

"Long ago, the mice held a general council to consider what measures they could take to outwit their common enemy, the Cat..." The discussion waxed and waned until they finally agreed that their life would be much safer if they simply had some warning when the cat was about. Someone should affix a small bell around the cat's neck. When the cat approached, the bell would ring and the mice could hide. The proposal met with general applause. What a wonderful notion... "Belling the Cat."

But there is an unhappy ending to Aesop's Fable. A wise old mouse gets up and says: "What an admirable notion, but who will bell the cat?" The mice looked at one another and nobody spoke... No one was willing to take the risk of assuming responsibility.

Copeland observes that the notion of responsibility has not fared well in our time. "On a personal level, given a choice, many of us prefer narcotic pleasures that dull the mind and quell the search for meaning."

And then, for me the crux, "Toward our institutions we cultivate a stance of ironic distance and to the extent possible avoid becoming responsible for their well-being." The "politics of blame" has become the predominant mode, rather than caring for our institutions."

I was reminded of Juergan Moltmann's devastating analysis that "over the developed and affluent Western societies, there seems to hang a banner which says "No Future..."

And of Lesslie Newbegin's recent caveat that "when religion loses its ability to hope for a different future all its energy disappears into private eschatology" [The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society] And of current thought-shapers - Sally McFague, Models of God, and Douglas John Hall, The Steward, arguing eloquently and passionately for a new ethic of responsibility.

I was reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's observation that "the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility" and the way he personally lived out the truth that Christian people are called by God to accept responsibility as citizens of the world were God places them.

And I was reminded of how easy it is to look at the state of the church and blame the people in Louisville, or the people before them in New York City, or Angela Davis, or the Presbytery, or the seminaries, or the liberals, or the conservatives, or the social activists, or the evangelicals, or the members of the Task Force on Human Sexuality.

I conclude it is time to stop and to assume responsibility for this church of ours; to stop blaming others, to stop wringing our hands - not to stop arguing and discussing and studying, that's what we do best... Maybe in the broad ecology of the Holy Catholic Church, asking and exploring the tough questions is our particular Presbyterian assignment. In any event, we've certainly become expert at it!

It's time, not to stop arguing, but to stop blaming and in the blaming backing away from responsibility for this precious institution.

Did you read in the paper last week about the 47-year-old Russian geology teacher who joined the younger people building and standing on the barricades protecting the Russian parliament from Soviet tanks? After it was over a reporter asked him why he had done it - put his life on the line, starring down the barrel of tank guns and automatic weapons. He said "a man sooner or later has to decide who he is. I decided who I was a long time ago, but just now had the chance to show it."

In Dag Hammarskjold's diary, Markings, there is an entry for Whitsunday 1961 - which continues to be one of my favorites and has sustained me over the years:

> "I don't know who - or what - put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer 'Yes' to someone or something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self surrender, had a goal." [p. 205]

The issue finally is a personal one... For each of us who has been asked to do a job, for each who has been called to ministry; it is a faith issue finally. Jesus Christ is God's "Yes" to the world and to the church and to you and me. "In him," St. Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, "everyone of God's promises is a 'Yes.'"

That same Jesus - standing on the beach, in the early morning, confronted Peter and asked the ultimate faith question - the only faith question really - "Do you love me?"

And Peter's answer was a "Yes, yes, Lord. You know I love you."

And Jesus said - "Feed my sheep."

So - "Yes." Yes we can do it. Yes we can actually love one another. Yes, we can love the world and feed the lambs of Jesus. Yes - by our personal responsibility - for church and world - you and I can make a difference... And in our doing, be part of his ongoing task of redeeming and renewing the Church and the whole creation...

YES. YES LORD.

ALL PRAISE TO HIM. AMEN.